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ABSTRACT

According to contemporary thought and foundational research, this paper presents various elements of the foreign language teaching profession and language learning environment in the United States as either product-driven or process-based. It is argued that a process-based approach to language teaching and learning benefits not only second language acquisition, but the foreign language professional as a whole. Also, the preparedness of instructors of college level foreign language courses is discussed, noting the role of culture and the notion of linguistic currency (Bourdieau, 1991). A conclusion regarding how to approach foreign language education and learning is reached by presenting Carse's (1986) philosophical constructs of finite and infinite games and their role in education. (Contains 39 references.) (Author/SM)

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An Infinite Game in a Finite Setting: Visualizing Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in America

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Abstract

According to contemporary thought and foundational research, this paper presents various elements of the foreign language teaching profession and language learning environment in the United States as either product-driven or process-based. It is argued that a process-based approach to language teaching and learning benefits not only second language acquisition, but the foreign language profession as a whole. Also, instructors of college-level foreign language courses are discussed as to overall preparedness as foreign language educators as well as the role of culture, and the notion of linguistic currency (Bourdieau 1991). A conclusion of how to approach FLEL is reached by presenting Carse's (1986) philosophical constructs of finite and infinite games and their role in education.

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Introduction

Perceptions of whether foreign language curriculums and programs have been successful or even useful in the United States can be attributed to the products and the process of learning and teaching foreign languages. This division allows us to take a closer look at how understanding language learning as either one or the other often dictates the very nature of the foreign language classroom, teacher education programs, instruction methods, and language assessment that we use in hopes of teaching languages to our students. If we are to clearly comprehend the image of foreign language learning and teaching in hopes of improving the overall awareness of the role that language learning plays in the development of a healthy society in the United States, then theory has to be made reasonable and the language teaching profession reputable at all levels of education. This paper depicts a myriad of elements are central to understanding the very public image of foreign language education and learning. Which, at best, is lackluster in

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the eyes of monolingual Americans that speak the most widespread and useful language in the world.

Linguistic Currency

Focusing on the popularity of English around the world as one reason for the situation that foreign language education and learning (FLEL) finds itself in has unwittingly taken precious energy and resources away from improving FLEL here in America. There are issues of Language and Power (Bourdieu 1986) all over the world, but those that enforce or support the English language over another usually do so in particular situations because English is the linguistic currency which individuals have decided to invest in. The argument that we hear all to often before a monolingual American travels abroad, "I am sure that they speak English over there", as a reason for not wanting to become familiar with or learn the language of the country places the citizens of the foreign country in the precarious situation of having to cater to the needs of other individuals in day to day activities or settings that benefit the American more than the international citizen. However, given that citizens in other countries deeply understand the importance of speaking another language in order to survive in today's global economy, they will more than likely be able to offer assistance in English (in this case).

Global English (Cheshire 1991) is most beneficial to those that speak another first language (or languages). In order for one to have linguistic currency one has to earn it. And in this case, international citizens that have learned English have earned the right to benefit from their efforts. Americans need to invest in learning a foreign language not

because they will be traveling, but because of those that travel to the United States for business or academic purposes. Capitalism in the USA has always been a cultural facet of the American psyche. If FLEL can be presented as providing one with linguistic currency (Boudieu 1991,Holliday 1994, Pugsley 1991) inside of the United States, then the pragmatic, product-driven, individuals may be more apt to invest in learning another language because they will need it even if they never leave the United States. If FLEL in the USA is to take on a new life then the concept of linguistic currency has to be re-introduced and reinforced within the schools and colleges as a pathway into personal, domestic financial security and focus.

Melted Cultures

Learning a foreign language opens new doors to understanding the cultures of the world (Geertz 1973). This statement has been pushed into the American frontal lobe from very early on in their academic lives, and as true as it may be, this argument has not had the intended impact; in part because the United States has been founded itself (arguably) on the notion of being a "melting pot". This image of different cultures merging into one, and then focusing on understanding that one culture (American), detracts from the above statement inasmuch as many people face the reality of not traveling outside of the United States due to financial or personal reasons. So, the many cultures that most Americans come into contact here are presented in English in one way or another (Gumperz and Levinson 1996); therefore, placing demystifying of culture as a reason for learning a second language in the same realm as being able to order in Spanish at a Mexican restaurant. Why do so when you can just call out a number most of the time? Ordering by

numbers (in English) erases the use of Spanish and infects the "melted" Mexican culture with numbers that represent (vaguely) culinary traditions that have been part of many families for centuries.

In order for the language teaching profession (LTP) to move forward, culture has to be presented as a frame of mind, as a way of being, that is linked to negotiating communication rather than just language use. Language and communication within the LTP needs to be treated as a process that assists in cultural understanding (Von Humboldt 1988) that is best developed within an authentic setting, but this may not be very easy in our melting pot. When high school instructors take their students to the local Mexican restaurant, is the impact that such an endeavor may have on their students fully understood? There is very little negotiation of meaning (Johnson 1995, Vygotsky 1978, Wells 1999) or true communication in such a setting. A student orders (perhaps a number) in Spanish, then after 15 minutes the perfect product of their language appears, lunch. Culture has to be presented as part of the process of learning a foreign language (Schultz 1990) and not just the obvious product of people interacting. Although this observation has been presented in a light-hearted manner, its implications may reverberate throughout classrooms in the United States. Taking students to local restaurants is wonderful way of lowering the affective filter, of making them feel more comfortable with their language use in a setting that is not the classroom. But, if the goal is to present or represent the culture of a language being studied then ask yourself this question: Would you like for a student in Italy to be taken to an American fast food restaurant in Rome and be given the impression that "This is why you are learning English and here is the typical American cultural environment"?

Culture is a domain of the mind (Lantolf 2000) that is accentuated and focused by the physical environment . This statement should never be reversed. Reversing it would mean that in order to be French all that a nation has to do is build an Eiffel Tower. The contemporary classroom view of culture put forth by the LTP is truly one of product because presenting the process in foreign language classrooms may takes energy, understanding, and effort that needs to focus on understandings and minds outside of the United States that is not seriously supported by the LTP in general.

Language learning and culture are intertwined. This fact is clear. But, the leap of faith comes when we use this concept in second language classrooms. Culture, in its true form, is a concept that cannot be defined within the realm of the classroom (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Wierzbicka 1992). And given the previous statement, many professionals believe that by presenting culture in the classroom then this helps second language acquisition (SLA), perhaps. When learning a first language, learning culture and language are both a process (Hanks 1996, Malinowski 1978). In a second language classroom, language is treated as a process while culture is understood as a product. This is very different from first language acquisition, and here is where we fall short in our leap of faith. There are fantastic humanistic goals that can be achieved if we present culture to our students as product, this is not in question. What is being challenged is the view of culture as a product when SLA is a process. This mindset can be traced back to current and past theories in language pedagogy and methodology.

Equations

In the space provided, please fill in the answer to the following equation: i+1 = ____. Undoubtedly, Krashen's (1981) vision of SLA and language teaching has been revolutionary in the field of FLEL, and rightfully so. SLA is a process where instructors need to redefine their methods and approaches in the classroom to make use of previously learned information in order to learn more of the language. Those that believe in Krashen's ideas, and fully understand them, can assist SLA in the classroom. It is the instructors that view the above equation as product-driven instead of product-based that misuse Krashen's framework in the classroom. Although language educators study many different methods and approaches, Krashen seems to stick out as the one that they most rely on in the United States, for one reason or another.

As of late, sociocultural theory has come to the forefront in FLEL. The work of scholars such as Bakhtin (1986), Vygotsky (1978), and Wertsch (1991) has found a new place in the American language classroom because of a concept that has also been misused by much of the teachers in the classroom. One of the pillars of sociocultural pedagogy, in any educational environment, is scaffolding (Lantolf 2000,Vygotsky 1978). At first glance, scaffolding seems very similar to i+1 (hence its popularity), but they couldn't be more different. Both use previous knowledge in their frameworks, but here is where the similarities end (Dunn & Lantolf 1998). Scaffolding is cognitive in nature, and i+1 is linguistic. Scaffolding a student entails negotiation of meaning, communicating back and forth, understanding where the student is (conceptually) and assisting them in using language to acquire a language.

Language within sociocultural thought is a tool (Donato 1994, Wertsch 1991). I+1 can be used to develop tools that can later be used to scaffold students and for SLA. Since it sounds "product-driven" (much like i+1), instructors have misunderstood its true intention. Nowadays what is being called scaffolding by many teachers resembles what used to be called tracking in our schools (Mantero 2002a). Tracking placed the students in a program or curriculum that already had the goals of the institution (or the individual teachers) as the product. When we scaffold students in a language classroom it is very important that we understand where they are cognitively and assist them in developing and processing the second language (Donato & Adair-Hauk 1992). The reality of the classroom is that it must have clear goals and objectives, and rightfully so, but these have taken precedent over the process of language learning in the United States. Therefore any valuable approach or mindset, such as sociocultural theory, is skewed to fit the confines of a system of language education that has changed little since the days Transformational Grammar (Chomsky 1965). Even though the theories may be evolving the day to day classroom practice is much slower to change. In part, this is due to the fact that practical classroom teachers need theory to be concretized for them, and those of us in the ivory towers may not be as adept as they think they are in doing this. Also, the classroom teacher has to rethink not only their stance on FLEL, but on their vocation as well.

(ir)Regular classroom teachers

FLEL in the United States has been placed, for the most part, on the fringes of the educational system where language course are some of the first to be deleted from programs because they are seen as non-essential. Logically, it follows, then foreign

language teachers are deemed non essential in some settings. In some environments such as foreign language exploratory programs (FLEX) at the elementary or middle-school levels, language instructors are not seen as "regular classroom teachers" and are asked to (made to) teach one or two more classes a day in order to give the "regular classroom teachers more" time to plan for the essential courses. In order to move beyond the vision of "non-essential" instructors or programs, administrators, politicians, and "regular classroom teachers" need to take a close look at the degrees that foreign language professionals hold. These degrees and courses of study are just as rigorous and demanding as any other field in education, and perhaps more because some instructors have to learn how to teach in a language that may not be there first.

College-Level Language Teaching

A particular aspect of the academic world in United States that may unknowingly be affecting the image for FLEL is the programs of foreign language learning in the many colleges of America. The Spanish, French, German, Russian, Italian, etc. language classes are almost always taught in the departments of modern languages, Slavic languages, romance languages, etc. in the safe harbors of the colleges of arts and science. Within these programs there is a need to teach the vast number of undergraduate students that take Spanish 101 or German 220, for example. Now we should think about who is teaching the courses.

The over whelming majority of the instructors are graduate assistant's that may be focusing on 18th century Spanish literature or Kantian dualism, for example. The majority of the instructors of the core foreign language courses in the colleges are not

foreign language educators (Mantero 2002b). This may seem like an empty point to make, and some may argue that the instructors do take a mandatory, 6, 10 or 12 week long summer course before entering the classroom. But does this make them a language teacher? The commitment and passion that the majority of the instructors bring to the college language classrooms is not being questioned. What does need to be revised and revisited is the training of these teachers that are responsible for the bulk of language learning that takes part in the higher institutions (Pica & Long 1986).

Even in some institutions, regular faculty members that hold Ph.Ds in Hispanic literature, German poetry, or literary criticism for example are in charge of teaching the core foreign language courses without having much, if any, training in second language acquisition, linguistics, or even foreign language pedagogy (Thomas 1998). Hopefully, the professors that walk into an Italian 101 classroom understand that the students are there to learn Italian and not what Dante may have alluded to in some of his writings; this comes later (Rosenblatt 1938). It is essential that higher education becomes aware of its role in improving the image of foreign language education in the United States by realizing that teaching literature or 'literary skills' and teaching languages are not one in the same, although both can co-exist and benefit from each other given a productive environment (Santoni 1971).

Dynamic Language Assessment

Earlier in this paper, it was argued that the LTP, especially in the classroom, has not dramatically changed since the days of Grammar Translation Method and

Transformational Grammar. If we take a look at language assessment in this arena, this point becomes even clearer.

Due to the preponderance of focus on the a priori structures of language, assessment methods have focused on these structures, mostly grammatical, that treat language learning as a product (Saville-Troike 1991, Shohamy 2000). Throughout this paper, it has been argued that language learning and SLA is a process. There are concepts and terms such as interlanguage (Schumann 1978) that we have learned to work into our methodologies, frameworks, and classroom lessons. However, when the LTP turns to assessing students it has for the most part focused on a priori language structures and patterns. Instructors that believe that assessment should be product-based on a priori structures, but teach or approach their lessons through a process-oriented framework do not truly assess the students' language skills and communicative ability. If we return for a moment to the earlier statements about often-misused concept of scaffolding, it is easy to see how scaffolding has been warped to fit into the product-based methods of a priori assessment methods that (for the most part) are grammatically based (Hopper & Thompson 1993). Scaffolding is not an assessment tool to be used for language *testing*. It is a concept that when properly applied to FLEL assi[illegible] the process of SLA. Teachers are not solely responsible for scaffolding students. Students and teachers scaffold each other during classroom talk (Hall 1995).

Focusing on a priori constructs also diminishes the need for an understanding of culture as a process. It is much easier to ask which is formal: "Usted" or "Tu" than to have a student attempt to change forms to give their proper register of familiarity after an extended interaction with the same person given a certain context.

In order for the LTP profession and FLEL to move forward an emergent framework (Wells 1999) is necessary if we are to truly assess language and communicative ability of our students that reflects the process of SLA and language learning. Authentic Assessment was introduced by Wiggins (1990) and Archibald and Newman (1989) as one form of working and teaching within an emergent framework of human learning and development. Basically, authentic assessment is founded on the notion of an emergent and in-process understanding of human learning (Tharp and Gallimore 1988). Authentic Assessment, as Wiggins states, allows for collaboration and discourse to develop in the language classroom, and therefore may be more cognitively challenging and assist SLA (Mantero 2002b). Tharp and Gallimore (1989) further define authentic assessment by introducing the role of instructional conversations (IC):

Parents and teachers who engage in instructional conversations are assuming that the (student) may have something to say beyond the known answers in the head of the adult. They occasionally extract from the (student) a 'correct' answer, but to grasp the communicative intent... adults need to listen carefully, and... to adjust their responses to assist (their) efforts (p.24).

Dynamic assessment, if implemented, will benefit the perception of FLEL in the United States because language learning will evolve from students being solely responsible for grammar knowledge and the products of various cultures to students being active participants and collaborators in their learning and evaluation.

Finite and Infinite Games: Conclusion

Comprehending the current image of FLEL as presented by the previous discussion will hopefully open doors to further dialogue that places the responsibility of

the success of programs and the students' language learning within the reach of teachers, researchers, administrators, and government policy. For only one entity to control the image of FLEL in the United States is impossible. Everyone has to understand that we are all playing the same game, so to speak, and benefit from a united front that addresses issues of pedagogy, assessment, methodology, and theory within the same realm.

Carse (1986) described life, in general, as consisting of a set of finite and infinite games. And if we approach a situation as one or the other the implications will affect other aspects of how we live, and in this case, learn. Essentially, Carse states that finite games are played for the purpose of finishing, of winning, and are driven based on knowledge of the desired final product. An infinite game does not come to an end as a finite game does. An infinite game is played, according to Carse, for the purpose of continuing the game. And language learning is an infinite game.

If the vision of FLEL in America is to change then a basic choice is the starting point of such an endeavor that hinges on how we believe languages are best learned and taught, and kept constant throughout the various levels of FLEL (instruction, methodology, teacher preparation, assessment and theory) as has been discussed. However, when making this decision it becomes essential that all of those involved remember that a process-based, infinite game cannot exist or be successful in a product-driven, finite setting, and hence, may be at the very center of improving FLEL in the United States.

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